

This Issue's Cover Picture

KEN PERLMAN

Pioneer of Melodic Clawhammer Banjo

An Interview with David Cotton

Ken Perlman is a pioneer in the art of melodic clawhammer banjo. A prolific performer, recording artist and author, Ken is also a delightful man, with a mischievous smile and incredible enthusiasm for his music and its history.

Born in New York, Ken now lives in Boston. He had piano lessons as a small child and his love for traditional music really began to grow during the American folk revival which peaked in the mid-60s.

As a student at Cornell University in Ithaca, Ken fell in with a group of musicians which included fiddler and clawhammer banjoist, Walt Koken (later to be a driving force in the Highwoods Stringband), Howie Bursen who developed a complex style of melodic clawhammer playing and John Roberts, who played clawhammer and as Ken suggests “channelled the Copper Family!”

Ken quickly learned the clawhammer style, which he likened to double-thumbing in guitar playing and he progressed quickly. Later, in Ithaca, he began to jam regularly with a group of half a dozen or so other budding musicians. The general feeling when it came to most reels and jigs was ‘everyone knows you can’t play *that* on a banjo’ – so he did. He had an instinct for ‘pushing out the boundaries of the style’. Some years later Ken moved to New York City and found a number of players there expanding the melodic clawhammer style. Henry Sapoznik, later known for his performance of both traditional American and Yiddish music, was in a band with Bob Carlin, another pioneer of the melodic clawhammer style. In 1976 Carlin produced a classic recording for ‘Kicking Mule Records’ called, simply, *Melodic Clawhammer Banjo*.

New York City was a major centre for Irish music sessions and Ken started to join them. Players there included Andy McGann, Paddy Reynolds, renowned fiddler Kathleen Collins (whom Ken would later play with as accompanist for a time) and Kathleen’s brother Dan who re-published ‘O’Neill’s Music of Ireland’.

In the 1980s the sound of Irish music changed in NYC and Ken found the new style less appealing. He moved to Boston which was a centre for both Irish and Cape Breton music. He entered a program in Ethnomusicology and decided to focus on Scottish music. Ken had a project for one semester in which he wrote a paper on a local Scottish fiddle club. He began to explore Scottish music and accumulate recordings of it. After achieving a Master’s Degree, he tried to get funding to study music in Scotland and, although no funding was forthcoming, he did receive a letter from someone on Canada’s Prince Edward Island (PEI) who not only offered food and lodging, but noted intriguingly, “We’ve got fiddlers here too!”

During the summer of 1989, Ken spent a couple of weeks on PEI. The weather was poor but, undeterred, he attended a little town music festival and some other local events where he met a number of

What is Clawhammer? For those readers unfamiliar with clawhammer banjo, it’s pretty much what its name suggests. Bluegrass and classic fingerstyle players are used to picking down with the thumb and up with the fingers. Clawhammer players create a loose ‘claw’ with their hand and ‘hammer’ down with the middle or index finger. For those coming to clawhammer from other styles, the down-picking will at first feel awkward. Once you have got it, it opens up new possibilities on the instrument. It requires a relaxed right hand, a fairly loose wrist and a striking action which looks a little like knocking on a door. The internet is awash with instructional videos on the technique. (See, for example, <http://bit.ly/2Cpsa33>).

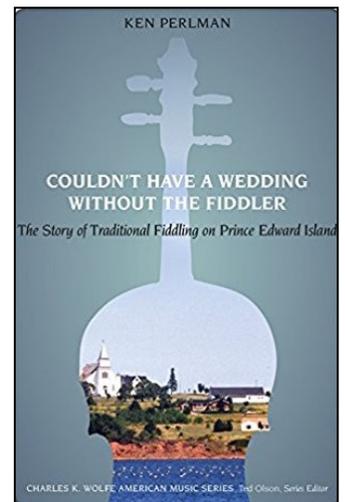
Clawhammer is sometimes called *frailing* and, whilst purists might draw some distinctions between them, the two words are often used interchangeably. In its early days the style often provided a rhythmic accompaniment to singing and fiddle playing. Ken and his contemporaries developed the style to play note-for-note fiddle tunes, hence the name *melodic clawhammer*. For a lovely insight into the differences between clawhammer and bluegrass playing, see this video from Bob Carlin and Tony Trischka (<http://bit.ly/2FF1DxK>).

wonderful fiddlers. Each introduced him to other players and he became captivated by the music. Because the music of PEI was so little known, he conceived the idea of doing a project on it: “I happened to be at The Library of Congress in Washington DC and found an announcement by the organization, Earthwatch, calling for folklore projects and mine was accepted”. He spent two summers in PEI, recording fiddle music and recording oral histories. Several generations ago, nearly every small community in America held dances, which were a focal point of their social life. Dances needed fiddlers. Whilst this custom disappeared in most areas, it flourished on PEI for some generations longer. Fiddlers developed their own styles and even in an area as small as PEI there remained stylistic pockets. There was a strong aesthetic sense in the fiddle music of PEI, marked by beautiful phrasing. “The community dance scene on PEI lasted long into the 60s, so when I came along in the 1990s there were still hundreds of fiddlers left who were active, although in many cases they didn’t play much out of the home”.

Ken contrasted this with the better publicised music in Appalachia, well known to bluegrass and other old time players. The tradition declined much earlier, so by the 1960s only a handful of collectors were still able to find traditional music in that region, and they included fiddler Alan Jabbour, who was later to become an important musical collaborator for Ken. Ken said, “People of my background from urban America wanted to preserve the music”. Ken’s research in PEI led to the publication of his wonderful musical and ethnographic study: ‘Couldn’t Have a Wedding Without the Fiddler: The Story of Traditional Fiddling on Prince Edward Island.’ (<http://amzn.to/2GRukXv>)

Ken has an enormous repertoire of tunes, far wider than that of most banjo players, but considers it small compared to that of the traditional fiddle players. He works hard on every tune to ensure that it sits well on the banjo while preserving the essence of the fiddle tune and style. He worked a lot on developing an ‘ergonomic’ approach to right hand technique, ‘bringing maximum power to bear on a point with flexibility and follow-through’. He focuses on phrasing, the overall sound and ornaments. I commented on the evenness of his tone along the length of the neck (unlike many clawhammer players, Ken plays along the whole length of the banjo neck). He confesses that he had to work hard at getting an even sound. When you are playing with the thumb and middle finger and striking strings almost entirely on the down stroke it can be easier to get a sharp, clear tone from the finger-stroke (where you strike the strings with a fingernail or pick) than from the thumb-stroke, where you strike with flesh. Driving hammers and coordinating pull-offs requires an exceptional technique. In bluegrass, the player learns to balance the attack with a thumb pick and fingerpicks which are often made of different material. In clawhammer the back of the fingernail produces one sound and the softer, fleshier thumb produces another, so you have to learn to give the string ‘a little bit of a sting’ with the thumb. Ken fixes a little bit of sticky tape to the back of his right middle finger to prevent wearing through the nail. Ken told me that: “Most people do pull-offs the wrong way. You need to draw an arched finger in towards the palm so you’re actually picking the string as you do the pull-off. Alternate string pull-offs can be tricky as you hit one string and pull off a higher string. Clawhammer involves a lot of funny techniques. Because the thumb is positioned to the bass-side of the ‘claw’, downward runs are natural and upward runs require creativity”. Ken looked to Bill Keith’s melodic techniques from which he borrowed the idea of fretting the fifth string with the left fingers. After playing for around 10 years, Ken met Eli Kaufman of the American Banjo Fraternity who sent him some pieces from Phil Rice’s banjo instruction book, written during the minstrel era (<http://bit.ly/2GTozIN>). Ken looked at how the tunes were constructed and felt immediately that he and the other melodic clawhammer players had reinvented the wheel. Reading music from around 100 years ago he was amazed that he ‘knew what the guy was thinking’. [Author’s note: Listen to Excelsior Jig from Phil Rice - <http://bit.ly/2oDvBtx> - and you will start to get a feel for what Ken was thinking here].

In the 1960s Chuck Ogsbury developed the ODE banjo which became very popular very quickly. It was bought by Baldwin, which owned Gretsch, Burns Guitar, Sho-Bud and others. They ultimately declared bankruptcy. Ogsbury couldn’t re-use the name ODE, which Baldwin owned, so called his new banjos OME as a kind of nod to his legacy. Ed Britt worked with Ogsbury and designed the beautiful Renaissance inlay pattern on the OME. Ogsbury designed a banjo model with a Silverspun tone ring, similar to that of a



Continued on the next page

Bacon & Day banjo and presented one as a gift to Ken. It had a beautiful singing tone and was very responsive, with a low profile neck which Ken likens to that of a Telecaster. Ken had OME build him a second one – which proved timely, because they don't make that style of banjo any more.

One of Ken's long time loves has been to design and run banjo camps, including the American Banjo Camp, Banjo Camp North, Maryland Banjo Academy, Midwest Banjo Camp, the Northwest Heritage Music Camp and the Suwannee Banjo Camp. (He also helped Julian Vincent run a few banjo festival in Bath, UK.) At around the age of 80, music professor and composer Harold Schiffman became interested in the banjo and he and his wife (a renowned pianist) began to attend the Suwannee Banjo Camp in Florida. After some years of attending, Schiffman suggested writing a banjo concerto for Ken. Ken reads both music and tablature and Schiffman suggested a tab version which Ken helped to shape. It's a beautiful little concerto and you can see a video of Ken playing the opening of the first movement on his Facebook page (<http://bit.ly/2F33URY>).

In the Summer of 2000 Ken was hired to teach at the Rocky Mountain Fiddle Camp and met Alan Jabbour, a fiddler and music collector, who was teaching fiddle there. "It was one of these cases where the person supposed to accompany him bowed out at the last moment. As soon as we started to play together we knew we were on the same wavelength. We recorded and toured for 15 years. I developed a whole approach adapted to his style, where among other strategies I employed playing in unison, harmonies, contrapuntal bass lines and a roll-like bed of notes". Ken found his playing suited Alan's to a tee. They became good friends. Sadly, Alan passed away in 2017. In January 2018, the Library of Congress held a legacy event for Alan. Ken did a presentation, as did performer Stephen Wade. Chairs were set out for 150 people but attendance was so high that the number of chairs had to be doubled to accommodate them. After the main event, some 50 people stayed on to play the tunes that Alan had collected. Among many others, they include *Over the waterfall*, *Ebenezer*, *Frosty morning* and *Kitchen Girl*. Most of these are now staples of the old-time and bluegrass world.

Ken says that the concept of melodic clawhammer playing is still controversial. The old-time purists don't accept the banjo in this role. He believes, however, that its future is secure because a lot of the younger players will continue the exploration. Ken cited Karen Linn's book '*That half barbaric twang: the banjo in American popular culture*' (<http://amzn.to/2COEGFc>) which epitomises the strong reactions that people have to the instrument. The book talks about the banjo's association with downtrodden elements of the population. In the old-time scene a lot of people got into playing the banjo precisely because it was seen as primitive. The melodic clawhammer players proved that it could be anything but primitive and some old-timers developed a strong prejudice against it. Some of those who developed the melodic style have ceased to play it.

I asked Ken about his approach to practice. "Every day I do some exercises that get me around the neck—melodic shapes that you get in bluegrass". As he is playing he is acutely aware of the chords underlying a melody. "It's very important for defining a phrase and understanding which notes need to be cut short and which can be held longer". Ken is still learning all the time—"So many tunes, so little banjo!"—and constantly creating new strategies for playing familiar tunes. "On a couple of tunes I'd been playing for years, I had problems getting speed, so I go back and revise my approach".

I commented that Ken rarely looks at the strings when he is playing. He told me that visualisation is a key element of his playing. He has "a mental image that can't exist in reality because it has too many dimensions". He pictures the fingerboard and the right and left hands – the playing is spooling out on a roll a little ahead of the music. He wrote an article on visualisation for the *Banjo Newsletter*: (<https://banjonews.com/2010-08/visualizing.html>).

His next project—a welcome addition to the repertoire for clawhammer players—is to do a banjo tablature book of Appalachian music for Mel Bay. I asked him who are among his favourite players and his list included young performers Lukas Pool (<http://bit.ly/2CuVpSa>), Adam Hurt (here playing a fretless gourd banjo) <http://bit.ly/2FEjgh3>, more established players Howie Bursen and Michael Miles (<http://bit.ly/2owXAw1>), and more traditional players Brad Leftwich (<http://bit.ly/2oE1Jxh>) and Paul Brown (<http://bit.ly/2FDI4G1v>). Ken's latest CD, *Frails and Frolics* (reviewed elsewhere in this issue) is a delight. I asked him which were the most challenging tunes and which were his favourites. Among the latter (of the 46 I counted on the recording) are the sets beginning with *Omar Cheverie's Jig* and *North Side of the Grampians*. The challenging tunes included the higher part of *Trip to Windsor*, *High Level Hornpipe* and the whole last set, which includes *The Marquis of Huntley*. Each presented different challenges. For

example, in order to get the right feel for Dallas Rag, Ken had to make use of virtually the entire system he devised for dealing with syncopation. We focused entirely on banjo playing in this interview. Ken is also a gifted fingerstyle guitarist and has recorded and written about guitar, too. As we finished our conversation, I suggested that this be the subject of a future interview. Watch this space! I'm grateful to Ken for giving up so much of his time. As a small reward, Ken would love to come back and play in the UK. If you are a venue manager, festival owner or can suggest places where Ken might perform, it would be great to hear from you. Let's bring him back to the UK and hear him play some of his wonderful music here.

A selection of Ken Perlman's books and recordings

Books:

- 1) Everything You Wanted to Know About Clawhammer Banjo. Mel Bay
- 2) Clawhammer Style Banjo (book and companion DVD). Centerstream/Hal Leonard
- 3) Celtic and New England Tunes for Clawhammer Banjo. Mel Bay
- 4) Melodic Clawhammer Banjo. Centerstream/Hal Leonard
- 5) The Fiddle Music of Prince Edward Island: Celtic & Acadian Tunes in Living Tradition. Mel Bay
- 6) Couldn't Have a Wedding Without the Fiddler: The Story of Traditional Fiddling on Prince Edward Island (University of Tennessee Press)

Recordings:

- 1) Frails & Frolics: Fiddle tunes from Prince Edward Island, Cape Breton & Elsewhere
- 2) You Can't Beat the Classics (with Alan Jabbour and Jim Watson)
- 3) Southern Summits (with Alan Jabbour)
- 4) Northern Banjo. AllMusic
- 5) Island Boy. Wizmak
- 6) Devil in the Kitchen. Marimac Music
- 7) Line in the U.K. Halshaw Music
- 8) Clawhammer Banjo & Fingerstyle Guitar Solos
- 9) Vintage Soundscapes (which includes Banjo Concerto and tracks by other artists).

BMG TAPE CLUB

Hawaiian Guitar Section by John Marsden

Our members will be delighted with this quarter's submissions. John Duthie has sent two CDs of music by Ed Kenney and Annette Funicello. Alan Morgan in Australia has contributed a wonderful DVD of performances by the popular Kahulanui, with their 'big band' style, a non-pedal session by the brilliant Doug Jernigan, and some old and wonderful films of Lani McIntire. Another DVD has come in from member Dave Botsford, featuring a fascinating and informative Hawaiian music documentary from 1989.

Finally, I am re-circulating a cassette transfer of an original reel-to-reel presentation, 'The Story of the Hawaiian Guitar', which was specially put together for the Tape Club by A. P. Sharpe and reviewed in the August 1959 issue of BMG. Most present-day members will not have heard it, and the programme has lost none of its interest and value. After almost 60 years it still plays very well!

Despite the wealth of material now put out on the internet, the Tape Club offers much of importance which cannot be found elsewhere. Best thanks to the above contributors who continue to support our Club.



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